

IV

THE SPIRIT MERCURIUS

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1. THE SPIRIT IN THE BOTTLE

Ἑρμῆ κοσμοκράτωρ, ἐνκάρδιε, κύκλε σελήνης,
στρογγύλε καὶ τετράγωνε, λόγων ἀρχηγέτα γλώσσης
πειθοδικαίουσνε, χλαμυδηφόρε, πτηνοπέδιλε,
παμφώνου γλώσσης μεδέων, θνητοῖσι προφήτα . . .

(Hermes, ruler of the world, dweller in the heart, circle of the moon,
Round and square, inventor of the words of the tongue,
Obedient to justice, wearer of the chlamys, shod in winged sandals,
Guardian of the many-sounding tongue, prophet to mortals.)

—A Magic Papyrus (Preisendanz, II, p. 139)

289 In my contribution¹ to the symposium on Hermes I will try to show that this many-hued and wily god did not by any means die with the decline of the classical era, but on the contrary has gone on living in strange guises through the centuries, even into recent times, and has kept the mind of man busy with his deceptive arts and healing gifts. Children are still told Grimm's fairytale of "The Spirit in the Bottle," which is ever-living like all fairytales, and moreover contains the quintessence and deepest meaning of the Hermetic mystery as it has come down to us today:

Once upon a time there was a poor woodcutter. He had an only son, whom he wished to send to a high school. However, since he could give him only a little money to take with him, it was used up long before the time for the examinations. So the son went home and helped his father with the work in the forest. Once, during the midday rest, he roamed the woods and came to an immense old oak. There he heard a voice calling from the ground, "Let me out, let me out!" He dug down among the roots of the tree and found a well-sealed glass bottle from which, clearly, the voice had come. He opened it and instantly a spirit rushed out and soon became half as high as the tree. The spirit cried in an awful voice: "I have had my punishment and I will be revenged! I am the great and mighty spirit Mercurius, and now you shall have your reward. Whoso releases me, him I must strangle." This made the boy uneasy and, quickly thinking up a trick, he said, "First, I must be sure that you are the same spirit that was shut up in that little bottle." To prove this, the spirit crept back into the bottle. Then the boy made haste to seal it and the spirit was caught again. But now the spirit promised to reward him richly if the boy would let

¹ I give only a general survey of the Mercurius concept in alchemy and by no means an exhaustive exposition of it. The illustrative material cited should therefore be taken only as examples and makes no claim to completeness. [For the "symposium on Hermes" see the editorial note on p. 191.—EDITORS.]

him out. So he let him out and received as a reward a small piece of rag. Quoth the spirit: "If you spread one end of this over a wound it will heal, and if you rub steel or iron with the other end it will turn into silver." Thereupon the boy rubbed his damaged axe with the rag, and the axe turned to silver and he was able to sell it for four hundred thaler. Thus father and son were freed from all worries. The young man could return to his studies, and later, thanks to his rag, he became a famous doctor.²

²⁴⁰ Now, what insight can we gain from this fairytale? As you know, we can treat fairytales as fantasy products, like dreams, conceiving them to be spontaneous statements of the unconscious about itself.

²⁴¹ As at the beginning of many dreams something is said about the scene of the dream action, so the fairytale mentions the forest as the place of the magic happening. The forest, dark and impenetrable to the eye, like deep water and the sea, is the container of the unknown and the mysterious. It is an appropriate synonym for the unconscious. Among the many trees—the living elements that make up the forest—one tree is especially conspicuous for its great size. Trees, like fishes in the water, represent the living contents of the unconscious. Among these contents one of special significance is characterized as an "oak." Trees have individuality. A tree, therefore, is often a symbol of personality.³ Ludwig II of Bavaria is said to have honoured certain particularly impressive trees in his park by having them saluted. The mighty old oak is proverbially the king of the forest. Hence it represents a central figure among the contents of the unconscious, possessing personality in the most marked degree. It is the prototype of the *self*, a symbol of the source and goal of the individuation process. The oak stands for the still unconscious core of the personality, the plant symbolism indicating a state of deep unconsciousness. From this it may be concluded that the hero of the fairytale is profoundly unconscious of himself. He is one of the "sleepers," the "blind" or "blindfolded," whom we

encounter in the illustrations of certain alchemical treatises.⁴ They are the unawakened who are still unconscious of themselves, who have not yet integrated their future, more extensive personality, their "wholeness," or, in the language of the mystics, the ones who are not yet "enlightened." For our hero, therefore, the tree conceals a great secret.⁵

²⁴² The secret is hidden not in the top but in the roots of the tree;⁶ and since it is, or has, a personality it also possesses the most striking marks of personality—voice, speech, and conscious purpose, and it demands to be set free by the hero. It is caught and imprisoned against its will, down there in the earth among the roots of the tree. The roots extend into the inorganic realm, into the mineral kingdom. In psychological terms, this would mean that the self has its roots in the body, indeed in the body's chemical elements. Whatever this remarkable statement of the fairytale may mean in itself, it is in no way stranger than the miracle of the living plant rooted in the inanimate earth. The alchemists described their four elements as *radices*, corresponding to the Empedoclean *rhizomata*, and in them they saw the constituents of the most significant and central symbol of alchemy, the *lapis philosophorum*, which represents the goal of the individuation process.

²⁴³ The secret hidden in the roots is a spirit sealed inside a bottle. Naturally it was not hidden away among the roots to start with, but was first confined in a bottle, which was then hidden. Presumably a magician, that is, an alchemist, caught and imprisoned it. As we shall see later, this spirit is something like the numen of the tree, its *spiritus vegetativus*, which is one

⁴ Cf. the title-page of *Mutus liber*, showing an angel waking the sleeper with a trumpet ("The Psychology of the Transference," Fig. 11). Also the illustration in Michelspacher's *Cabala, speculum artis et naturae* (Psychology and Alchemy, Fig. 93). In the foreground, before a mountain upon which is a temple of the initiates, stands a blindfolded man, while further back another man runs after a fox which is disappearing into a hole in the mountain. The "helpful animal" shows the way to the temple. The fox or hare is itself the "evasive" Mercurius as guide (*δδγγός*).

⁵ For additional material on the tree symbol, see *infra*, "The Philosophical Tree," Part II.

⁶ This motif was used in the same sense by the Gnostics. Cf. Hippolytus, *Elenchos*, V, 9, 15, where the many-named and thousand-eyed "Word of God" is "hidden in the root of All."

² [Author's paraphrase. Cf. "The Spirit in the Bottle," *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (trans. Hunt, rev. Stern), pp. 458–62.—EDDORS.]

³ Concerning personification of trees, see Frazer, *The Magic Art*, II, ch. 9. Trees are also the dwelling places of spirits of the dead or are identical with the life of the newborn child (*ibid.*, I, p. 184).

definition of Mercurius. As the life principle of the tree, it is a sort of spiritual quintessence abstracted from it, and could also be described as the *principium individuationis*. The tree would then be the outward and visible sign of the realization of the self. The alchemists appear to have held a similar view. Thus the "Aurelia occulta" says: "The philosophers have sought most eagerly for the centre of the tree which stands in the midst of the earthly paradise."⁷ According to the same source, Christ himself is this tree.⁸ The tree comparison occurs as early as Eulogius of Alexandria (c. A.D. 600), who says: "Behold in the Father the root, in the Son the branch, and in the Spirit the fruit: for the substance [*ousia*] in the three is one."⁹ Mercurius, too, is *trinus et unus*.

²⁴⁴ So if we translate it into psychological language, the fairytale tells us that the mercurial essence, the *principium individuationis*, would have developed freely under natural conditions, but was robbed of its freedom by deliberate intervention from outside, and was artfully confined and banished like an evil spirit. (Only evil spirits have to be confined, and the wickedness of this spirit was shown by its murderous intent.) Supposing the fairytale is right and the spirit was really as wicked as it relates, we would have to conclude that the Master who imprisoned the *principium individuationis* had a good end in view. But who is this well-intentioned Master who has the power to banish the principle of man's individuation? Such power is given only to a ruler of souls in the spiritual realm. The idea that the principle of individuation is the source of all evil is found in Schopenhauer and still more in Buddhism. In Christianity, too, human nature is tainted with original sin and is redeemed from this stain by Christ's self-sacrifice. Man in his "natural" condition is neither good nor pure, and if he should develop in the natural way the result would be a product not essentially different from an animal. Sheer instinctuality and naïve unconsciousness untroubled by a sense of guilt would prevail if the Master had not interrupted the free development of the natural being by introducing a distinction between good and evil and outlawing the evil. Since without guilt there is no moral consciousness and

⁷ *Theatrum chemicum*, IV (1659), p. 500.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 478: "(Christ), who is the tree of life both spiritual and bodily."

⁹ Krueger, *Das Dogma von der Dreieinigkeit und Gottmenschheit*, p. 207.

without awareness of differences no consciousness at all, we must concede that the strange intervention of the master of souls was absolutely necessary for the development of any kind of consciousness and in this sense was for the good. According to our religious beliefs, God himself is this Master—and the alchemist, in his small way, competes with the Creator in so far as he strives to do work analogous to the work of creation, and therefore he likens his microcosmic opus to the work of the world creator.¹⁰

²⁴⁵ In our fairytale the natural evil is banished to the "roots," that is, to the earth, in other words the body. This statement agrees with the historical fact that Christian thought in general has held the body in contempt, without bothering much about the finer doctrinal distinctions.¹¹ For, according to doctrine, neither the body nor nature in general is evil *per se*: as the work of God, or as the actual form in which he manifests himself, nature cannot be identical with evil. Correspondingly, the evil spirit in the fairytale is not simply banished to the earth and allowed to roam about at will, but is only hidden there in a safe and special container, so that he cannot call attention to himself anywhere except right under the oak. The bottle is an artificial human product and thus signifies the intellectual purposefulness and artificiality of the procedure, whose obvious aim is to isolate the spirit from the surrounding medium. As the *vas Hermeticum* of alchemy, it was "hermetically" sealed (i.e., sealed with the sign of Hermes);¹² it had to be made of glass, and had also to be as round as possible, since it was meant to represent the cosmos in which the earth was created.¹³ Transparent glass is something like solidified water or air, both of which are synonyms for spirit. The alchemical retort is therefore equivalent to the *anima mundi*, which according to an old alchemical conception surrounds the cosmos. Caesarius of Heisterbach (thirteenth century) mentions a vision in which the soul appeared as a

¹⁰ In the "Dicta Belini" Mercurius even says: "Out of me is made the bread from which comes the whole world, and the world is formed from my mercy, and it fails not, because it is the gift of God" (*Distinctio XXVIII*, in *Theatr. chem.*, V, 1660, p. 87).

¹¹ Cf. the doctrine of the *status iustitiae originalis* and *status naturae integrae*.

¹² Cf. Rev. 20 : 3: "and set a seal upon him."

¹³ "The Fift is of Concord and of Love, / Betweene your Warkes and the Spheare above."—Norton's "Ordinall of Alchimy," *Theatrum chemicum Britannicum*, ch. 6, p. 92.

spherical glass vessel.¹⁴ Likewise the "spiritual" or "ethereal" (*aethereus*) philosophers' stone is a precious *vitrum* (sometimes described as *malleabile*) which was often equated with the gold glass (*aurum vitreum*) of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21 : 21).

²⁴⁶ It is worth noting that the German fairytale calls the spirit confined in the bottle by the name of the pagan god, Mercurius, who was considered identical with the German national god, Wotan. The mention of Mercurius stamps the fairytale as an alchemical folk legend, closely related on the one hand to the allegorical tales used in teaching alchemy, and on the other to the well-known group of folktales that cluster round the motif of the "spellbound spirit." Our fairytale thus interprets the evil spirit as a pagan god, forced under the influence of Christianity to descend into the dark underworld and be morally disqualified. Hermes becomes the demon of the mysteries celebrated by all *tenebriones* (obscurantists), and Wotan the demon of forest and storm; Mercurius becomes the soul of the metals, the metallic man (*homunculus*), the dragon (*serpens mercurialis*), the roaring fiery lion, the night raven (*nycticorax*), and the black eagle—the last four being synonyms for the devil. In fact the spirit in the bottle behaves just as the devil does in many other fairytales: he bestows wealth by changing base metal into gold; and like the devil, he also gets tricked.

¹⁴ *Dialogus miraculorum*, trans. by Scott and Bland, I, pp. 42, 236.

2. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SPIRIT AND TREE

²⁴⁷ Before continuing our discussion of the spirit Mercurius, I should like to point out a not unimportant fact. The place where he lies confined is not just any place but a very essential one—namely, under the oak, the king of the forest. In psychological terms, this means that the evil spirit is imprisoned in the roots of the self, as the secret hidden in the principle of individuation. He is not identical with the tree, nor with its roots, but has been put there by artificial means. The fairytale gives us no reason to think that the oak, which represents the self, has grown out of the spirit in the bottle; we may rather conjecture that the oak presented a suitable place for concealing a secret. A treasure, for instance, is preferably buried near some kind of landmark, or else such a mark is put up afterwards. The tree of paradise serves as a prototype for this and similar tales: it, too, is not identical with the voice of the serpent which issued from it.¹ However, it must not be forgotten that these mythical motifs have a significant connection with certain psychological phenomena observed among primitive peoples. In all such cases there is a notable analogy with primitive animism: certain trees are animated by souls—have the character of personality, we would say—and possess a voice that gives commands to human beings. Amaury Talbot² reports one such case from Nigeria, where a native soldier heard an *oji* tree calling to him, and tried desperately to break out of the barracks and hasten to the tree. Under cross-examination he alleged that all those who bore the name of the tree now and then heard its voice. Here the voice is undoubtedly identical with the tree. These psychic phenomena

¹ Mercurius, in the form of Lilith or Melusina, appears in the tree in the Ripley *Scrowle*. To this context belongs also the hamadryad as an interpretation of the so-called "Aenigma Bononiense." Cf. *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, pp. 68f.

² *In the Shadow of the Bush*, pp. 31f.

suggest that originally the tree and the daemon were one and the same, and that their separation is a secondary phenomenon corresponding to a higher level of culture and consciousness. The original phenomenon was nothing less than a nature deity, a *tremendum* pure and simple, which is morally neutral. But the secondary phenomenon implies an act of discrimination which splits man off from nature and thus testifies to the existence of a more highly differentiated consciousness. To this is added, as a tertiary phenomenon testifying to a still higher level, the moral qualification which declares the voice to be an evil spirit under a ban. It goes without saying that this third level is marked by a belief in a "higher" and "good" God who, though he has not finally disposed of his adversary, has nevertheless rendered him harmless for some time to come by imprisonment (Rev. 20 : 1-3).

248 Since at the present level of consciousness we cannot suppose that tree daemons exist, we are forced to assert that the primitive suffers from hallucinations, that he hears his own unconscious which has projected itself into the tree. If this theory is correct—and I do not know how we could formulate it otherwise today—then the second level of consciousness has effected a differentiation between the object "tree" and the unconscious content projected into it, thereby achieving an act of enlightenment. The third level rises still higher and attributes "evil" to the psychic content which has been separated from the object. Finally a fourth level, the level reached by our consciousness today, carries the enlightenment a stage further by denying the objective existence of the "spirit" and declaring that the primitive has heard nothing at all, but merely had an auditory hallucination. Consequently the whole phenomenon vanishes into thin air—with the great advantage that the evil spirit becomes obviously non-existent and sinks into ridiculous insignificance. A fifth level, however, which is bound to take a quintessential view of the matter, wonders about this conjuring trick that turns what began as a miracle into a senseless self-deception—only to come full circle. Like the boy who told his father a made-up story about sixty stags in the forest, it asks: "But what, then, was all the rustling in the woods?" The fifth level is of the opinion that something did happen after all: even though the psychic content was not the tree, nor a spirit in the tree, nor indeed any spirit at

all, it was nevertheless a phenomenon thrusting up from the unconscious, the existence of which cannot be denied if one is minded to grant the psyche any kind of reality. If one did not do that, one would have to extend God's *creatio ex nihilo*—which seems so obnoxious to the modern intellect—very much further to include steam engines, automobiles, radios, and every library on earth, all of which would presumably have arisen from unimaginably fortuitous conglomerations of atoms. The only thing that would have happened is that the Creator would have been renamed Conglomeratio.

249 The fifth level assumes that the unconscious exists and has a reality just like any other existent. However odious it may be, this means that the "spirit" is also a reality, and the "evil" spirit at that. What is even worse, the distinction between "good" and "evil" is suddenly no longer obsolete, but highly topical and necessary. The crucial point is that so long as the evil spirit cannot be proved to be a subjective psychic experience, then even trees and other suitable objects would have, once again, to be seriously considered as its lodging places.

3. THE PROBLEM OF FREEING MERCURIUS

250 We will not pursue the paradoxical reality of the unconscious any further now, but will return to the fairytale of the spirit in the bottle. As we have seen, the spirit Mercurius bears some resemblance to the "cheated devil." The analogy, however, is only a superficial one, since, unlike the gifts of the devil, the gold of Mercurius does not turn to horse droppings but remains good metal, and the magic rag does not turn to ashes by morning but retains its healing power. Nor is Mercurius tricked out of a soul that he wanted to steal. He is only tricked into his own better nature, one might say, in that the boy succeeds in bottling him up again in order to cure his bad mood and make him tractable. Mercurius becomes polite, gives the young fellow a useful ransom and is accordingly set free. We now hear about the student's good fortune and how he became a wonder-working doctor, but—strangely enough—nothing about the doings of the liberated spirit, though these might be of some interest in view of the web of meanings in which Mercurius, with his many-sided associations, entangles us. What happens when this pagan god, Hermes-Mercurius-Wotan, is let loose again? Being a god of magicians, a *spiritus vegetativus*, and a storm daemon, he will hardly have returned to captivity, and the fairytale gives us no reason to suppose that the episode of imprisonment has finally changed his nature to the pink of perfection. The bird of Hermes has escaped from the glass cage, and in consequence something has happened which the experienced alchemist wished at all costs to avoid. That is why he always sealed the stopper of his bottle with magic signs and set it for a very long time over the lowest fire, so that "he who is within may not fly out." For if he escapes, the whole laborious opus comes to nothing and has to be started all over again. Our lad was a Sunday's child and possibly one of the poor in spirit, on whom was bestowed a bit of the Kingdom of Heaven in the shape of the self-

renewing tincture, with reference to which it was said that the opus needed to be performed only once.¹ But if he had lost the magic rag he would certainly never have been able to produce it a second time, by himself. It looks as though some Master had succeeded in capturing the mercurial spirit and then hid him in a safe place, like a treasure—perhaps putting him aside for some future use. He may even have planned to tame the wild Mercurius to serve him as a willing "familiar," like Mephisto—such trains of thought are not strange to alchemy. Perhaps he was disagreeably surprised when he returned to the oak tree and found that his bird had flown. At any rate, it might have been better not to have left the fate of the bottle to chance.

251 Be that as it may, the behaviour of the boy—successfully as it worked out for him—must be described as alchemically incorrect. Apart from the fact that he may have infringed upon the legitimate claims of an unknown Master by setting Mercurius free, he was also totally unconscious of what might follow if this turbulent spirit were let loose upon the world. The golden age of alchemy was the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century. At that time a storm bird did indeed escape from a spiritual vessel which the daemons must have felt was a prison. As I have said, the alchemists were all for not letting Mercurius escape. They wanted to keep him in the bottle in order to transform him: for they believed, like Petasios, that lead (another arcane substance) was "so bedevilled and shameless that all who wish to investigate it fall into madness through ignorance."² The same was said of the elusive Mercurius who evades every grasp—a real trickster who drove the alchemists to despair.³

¹ "For he that shall end it once for certeyne, / Shall never have neede to begin againe."—Norton's "Ordinall of Alchimy," *Theatr. chem. Brit.*, ch. 4, p. 48.

² Olympiodorus in Berthelot, *Alchimistes grecs*, II, iv, 43.

³ Cf. the entertaining "Dialogus Mercurii alchymistae et naturae," in *Theatr. chem.*, IV (1659), pp. 449ff.